DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 857 IR 056 172

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TITLE Discourse after the Bomb.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 5p.; In: Sustaining the Vision. Selected Papers from the Annual Conference of the International Association of School Librarianship (24th, Worcester, England, July 17-21, 1995); see IR 056 149.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Literature; Cultural Differences; Discourse Analysis; Discourse Modes; Foreign Countries; *Literary Devices; Novels; *Nuclear Warfare; Semantics; Stereotypes
IDENTIFIERS *Literary Theory

ABSTRACT

A number of texts concerning the possibility of a nuclear war and more particularly, its aftermath, have been published for adults and senior school children. This paper discusses literary theory with a focus on two texts currently used with 14-year olds: "Z for Zachariah" by Robert C. O'Brien and "Brother in the Land" by Robert Swindells. Highlights include: heteroglossia, which refers to the socially saturated nature of all utterances, or the "discourse of the other"; differences in the novels' discourses; diversity in language in the two texts; stereotyping; and the uses of persuasive and authoritative discourse. (AEF)

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ED 400 857

Discourse After the Bomb

by
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"We cling to the Conventions; we devote ourselves to strengthening old ideas more than to looking for new ones. We soothe where we ought to alarm and stir to action ... the only things that perish are things which are not really used." Christa Wolf: 'The Reader and the Writer', in *The Writer's Dimension, Selected Essays* Virago, 1993.

In 1962 nuclear missiles were stationed in Cuba by Kruschev in the most dangerous piece of cold war brinkmanship yet seen. Fortunately for us, since our presence on this earth, in this condition of relative civilization, would have been impossible, they were not "eally used." Since that date a number of tests concerning the possibility of a nuclear war and more particularly its aftermath, as a nuclear war itself is of no interest, have been published for adults and senior school children.

My focus will be on two texts currently used with fourteen year olds in this country: *Z for Zachariah* by Robert C. O'Brien and *Brother in the Land* by Robert Swindells.

This is not a close textual analysis of these books, but a refraction of their reading through literary theory, especially the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. I shall first establish the framework of theory through which I am reading these texts, by reference to Bakhtin's essay "Discourse in the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981). Bakhtin's argument concerns two opposing forces in language, language being conceived of as "a system of linguistic norms . . . the generative forces of linguistic life, forces that struggle to overcome the heteroglossia of language, forces that unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought."[1] The force which seeks to standardize is the centripetal, and that which resists is the centrifugal.

Language is also conditioned by heteroglossia, a term partly analogous to Derrida's much later differance. Heteroglossia refers to the socially saturated nature of all utterances--loosely, it is the "discourse of the other," a term familiar from the work of Lacan, which is always present at the microlinguistic level. My words are shared with you, and if you are not of my persuasion, there may well be serious conflicts arising from the heteroglossic nature of our utterances. Of course, the situation of our discourse is never free. The degrees of constraint will vary with the structure of the social determinants. Hence in the individual the discourse of the other will always be significant. "Another's discourse performs ... no longer as information, directions, rules, models, and so forth--but strives rather to determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behavior; it performs here as authoritative discourse, and an internally per-suasive discourse."[2]

There is a startling congruence between Bakhtin's concepts and the Lacanian position regarding the self as being structured in the interstices of linguistic forms. For the Bakhtinian self is either indissolubly a product of the discourse of the other--the authoritative enforced discourse, or a fluid, unsettled construction, moving within internally persuasive discourses, that ironically have emanated from the discourse of the other, leaving open "ever new ways to mean."[3] If we remember the self of psychoanalytic disclosure, split, chained to a desire for that which it cannot articulate, we may then enter the fictional world of the novels we are teaching our children with sharper and more wary a focus.

A number of differences concerning the novels' discourses are clear. *Z for Zachariah* involves two participants, the sixteen year old Ann Burden and the thirty-something scientist John Loomis. *Brother in the Land* is populated by the social groupings of a small Yorkshire town.

The consequent diversity in language engendered by the two texts is thus partly predictable, as it would of necessity be if we accept the accuracy of Bakhtin's theories, but also distinctly revelatory of aspects of our being we consider fundamental. Ann Burden, in *Z for Zachariah*, writes, "I thought, what's the use of writing anyway, when nobody is ever going to read it?" (p8) This heartfelt cry for the other's discourse to validate the experience of the self that is its linguistic correlate finds a strange, powerful echo in Bakhtin's last published work, "There is no first or last

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discourse, and dialogical context knows no limits...nothing is absolutely dead; every meaning will celebrate its rebirth."[4] But O'Brien fudges the issue, with the cozy interpellation of an addressee, the child reader, who is alive and well, living very comfortably in Worcester in 1995. "Then I would remind myself: some time years from now, you're going to read it. I was pretty sure I was the only person left in the world." The persistent optimism in this novel is epitomized by such facile juxtaposition. Of course, it is a teen-age audience of readers, and they must be . . . what must they be? I find a verb here difficult, because I want to say pacified. At the end of the novel the text runs thus, "The dream was gone, yet I knew which way to go. As I walk I search the horizon for a trace of green. I am hopeful." (p.192) All the conventions of realism, with its justified closure, evaporate in the nausea of this final image--transpose to a Western, with the setting sun framing the exploring hero, and the lie screams in your face. How can the reader accept "hopeful" as the last word on the post-nuclear world? Here is only the kitsch of the American dream.

In contrast *Brother in the Land* is bleak in its closing sentences, 'What I've tried to say is it was horrible. Too horrible to describe, though I've done my best. And so now I end it, and it is for little Ben, my brother, In the land." (p.151) The probability of the narrator's survival is minimal. He has been exposed to the initial burst of radiation from the bomb blast. But within the stark narrative, one which grips with its tension and movement, a great deal more has been laid before the reader in terms of the dilemmas created by the material preconditions of discourse, and the frailty of discourse itself within an extreme situation.

So it is then that Danny Lodge, the teenage narrator of *Brother in the Land*, strug-gles with the decency of his internally persuasive discourse in the early stages of the novel. "The soldiers, or whatever they are. They'll come and sort things out." "Why?" There was a mocking light in her eyes. "Because it's their job," I snapped. "That's why. Soldiers always step in where there's a disaster." 'You're joking!" (p.32)

The other voice here is that of Kim, the young woman Danny meets and forms a close relationship with. Her internally persuasive discourse is heteroglossic, concerned to distrust radically the authoritative discourses of prebomb society. The contrast between these two characters is foregrounded throughout It is Kim who saves Danny from death, by killing his would-be murderer. Kim dialogizes Danny's conventional discourse in a way which disrupts, which has some affinity with the carnivalesque, the ritualized overturning of conventional roles and discourse types described by Bakhtin in his book on Rabelais. She has the strength of understanding denied to the male, who is caught in the discourse of the Other, that authoritarian site of spuriously objective conventions.

In marked contrast, Ann Burden has the internally persuasive discourse of an idealized Puritan, transposed to the late C20.

> "Let the chickens out of the chicken yard . . . Let the two cows and the calf, the young bull calf, cut through the pasture gate . . . There is still good grass in the far fields down the road, water in the pond, and the calf will keep the fresh cow milked . . . Dig up the vegetable garden." p.12

All this, to keep her presence unknown to the Other she knows is near. The implication is that her dedicated, orderly labor is a sacred duty; it creates for her the protection of a self-sufficiency that has excluded dialogical reality. She is constructed as a passive isolate, an Eve whose knowledge, of the contaminated stream, she will not share with the stranger until he has bathed in it, thus contacting radiation sickness. "All I can do is wait and watch. I hope it doesn't kill him." (p.27) This, from a young woman who has guns, knows how to use them, has the advantage of territorial knowledge, makes her refusal to intervene culpable in its passivity.

The novel continues to erode the possibility of discourse in its negative stereotyping. Loomis, the scientist, is an inventor of radiation proof material and wears a suit made of this. But he, being a man, is both aggressive -- he has killed Edward, a former colleague, to retain possession of the suit, and a potential rapist. In spite of Ann's understanding of her environment, and her ability to handle machinery, it is the scientist who is given the role of applied technologist. For all its sincerity, the text stays locked into the liberal humanist view of humanity that gives its readers quiet despair, and the satisfaction of submission to a self which submits to the internally persuasive discourse of its gendered impotence. In this novel there is no such thing as society.

The society of *Brother in the Land*, by way of contrast, retains its old order of discourse; the repositories of authoritative external discourse, such as, "Councillor Finch, the coal merchant who was always getting his picture in the *Times*. The *Skipley Times*, not the big one." (p.100), are depicted as those whom power has absolutely corrupted in the post-nuclear scene of predatory survival: "Finch slapped his hand in exasperation. 'Get him out of here, Booth. Take him out and shoot him.'" (p101). There is a military brutality in the discourse, cleverly dialogized by several references to World War II, which receives its ultimate carnivalization in the arrival of the Swiss.

In Danny's thoughts, "The fact that we'd been found by the Swiss was the icing on the cake, the little barrel of brandy round the St. Bernard's neck." (p.136) This grimly humorous stereotype is dialogized in the next page. The Swiss captain is severely military and militaristic.

> "You have seen fit to run this Headquarters along communist lines, rather than inthe manner laid down by your Government."
>
> "No, I've already explained. It was necessary."
>
> "It was your duty to protect your Commissioner, Captain. And if you became a prisoner of war it was your duty to escape." (p 138/9).

The authoritative external discourse of military semantic fields has just as much hold over the Swiss as it had over the warring nations whose bombs had destroyed civilization in the opening pages of the novel. It is, in Bakhtin's terms, the monolglossia which attempts to dictate a single point of view that the reader is aware of. It is terrifying to realize that there are no humane discourses left for entry, except in the scarcely societal organization of Branwell's group.

Swindells makes it absolutely clear that language is at the heart of our proper relations with each other as human beings. For as the deterioration of the post-nuclear "society" becomes more widespread as material conditions worsen, so the language of the survivors begins to be corrupted. New categories for survivors in particular circumstances emerge, together with a ghastly lexis of dehumanization--"Badgers" isolated in shelters--"Spacers" whose minds have been blasted to lunacy--"Goths" raiders from outside the area--"Purples" survivors who become cannibals. How insidious this kind of debased interpellation is may be shown by reference to Kafka's short novel, *Metamorphosis*, in which Gregor Samsa wakes up to his transformation as a bug. The word "ungeziefer" used by Kafka to describe Gregor, was Hitler's term for the Jews. We may also recall Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*, in which the coinages "megadeath" and "overkill" are discussed to show how language structures a world view, in this case, the apparently unthinkable.

It would not be out of place to mention another novel set in a post-nuclear world, for its challenge to us in exposing precisely this relationship. Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, not written for children, nevertheless is a powerful intertext for this discussion. The scene is very far into the future; there is no literacy. The people of this world are searching for understanding through language which is fragmented, medieval and modern, primitive and technologized. A character called Goodparley, the 'pry mincer' of Inland, explains the power of language in an ironically impoverished discourse.

> "What ben makes tracks for what wil be. Words in the air pirnt footsteps on the groun for us to put our feet into!" (p121)

The sadness and enormity of the loss is caught brilliantly in these words:

> "Riddley we ain't as good as them before us; weve come way down from what they ben time back way back. May be it wer the farms what done it poysening the lan or when they made a hoal in what they callit the Ozoan." (p125)

What is internally persuasive discourse for the main characters in the three novels I have considered runs then a wide spectrum. For Ann Burden in *Z for Zachariah* it is the sum of the Puritan tradition, creating through the window of her words an impossibly good and long suffering being, locked into a world view that does not challenge. Danny Lodge, in *Brother in the Land*, is

caught between his adherence to an internally persuasive discourse that derives from the old, decent ideologies of middle class England, and a developing understanding that Kim's words carry truth: his own discourses are dialogized by the cold militarism of the Swiss, and his adoption of dehumanized language when captured. "A Spacer. I'd pretend to be a Spacer. Spacers don't know any-thing." p98. Swindells displays through his fiction the pressure of change caused by an extreme situation. Hoban takes the process to an outcome which recalls William Golding's portrait of Neanderthals in *The Inheritors*. Whereby language has been broken and partially reformed, and the authoritarian external discourses of the scientists and priests which vied with each other in the prenuclear time, are dialogized into as groping myth; Riddley Walker, himself struggles throughout the novel to articulate the basis of his own internally persuasive discourse in a landscape inherited from our folly.

Such differentiation may well offer us the basis of a valuation of these texts. Certainly we can see through the lens of Bakhtin that discourse is our primary hold on the civilized, and that it is no easy grip. When away from our individual beings there are discourses of such power they threaten the very possibility of our long term survival. From this perspective *Brother in the Land* and *Riddley Walker* offer some kind of a dialogic, heteroglossic reply to the dilemma we all have, being language animals, which Christa Wolf shows so well in *Accident*.

> "We have accepted the gifts of false gods and all of us, every single one, have eaten the wrong foods from the wrong plates." p98.

End note: As I make a final edit of this paper, the news reported that Greenpeace was setting off to the South Pacific to try to prevent the resumption of nuclear testing by the French government.

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3. Ibid., p.79
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